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28 September 1980

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Remarks of [] Academic Specialist on
Iran, on Current Iranian Situation

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Summary

[] believes there is little possibility for mediation of the Iran-Iraq conflict. The Europeans are in the strongest position to mediate because Iran traditionally looks for a third power to balance the two great powers. There is little possibility that the Iranians will "eat crow" on the hostage issue in order to gain spare parts.

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[] believes it is too early to make any confident predictions about the political prospects in Iran. He acknowledges that the need for funds to rebuild the oil industry may contribute to moderation, but he believes that factional infighting will continue.

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Mediation of the Iran-Iraq Conflict

[] sees little possibility for a successful mediation of the conflict now. World community interest in the problem makes it more difficult for the Iranians to contemplate negotiation. The Iranians have cast themselves in the role of the defenders of Islam. To submit to third party mediation would ultimately mean to treat with the "imperialists" and their Iraqi "agents" and thereby undermine the moral position they have taken. [] believes the best outcome to be hoped for is that the conflict will come to an end by itself.

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Quiet approaches by European states to the Iranians, in [] view, are the only mediation option that might have any effect. [] noted that the Iranians are deeply cynical and that they would understand an approach based on the

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mediator's self-interest rather than an appeal to principle. A German approach based on the German's interest in eventually selling new refinery equipment, for example, would be better received than an appeal to the need to restore stability in the area. []

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[] emphasized the possible strength of the Europeans' position in dealing with Iran. The Iranians traditionally have looked to a third power to play off against the two major powers. The origins of US influence in Iran, for example, are in the US role as a balancing force to the Soviet-British rivalry of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. []

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Iranian Response to the Iraqi Conflict

[] believes there is a good possibility that the Iranians will attempt to widen the conflict to include the Saudis or the Gulf States. He noted the strong racist element in Iranian thinking--their contempt and hatred for Arabs--and the probability that the conflict is increasingly perceived in Iran as a battle against all the Arabs. The Iranians are most likely, however, to attempt to subvert the Arab states by stirring up Shia dissidence rather than to launch an open attack. []

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The Iranians' commitment to their land--their present borders--is an emotionally compelling theme which militates against compromise. They are likely to see their ability to inflict damage on the Iraqis as a "great victory"--the Iraqi invasion drags on whereas the British and Soviet invasion in 1941 took only three days. They may read the situation in terms of the religious paradigm of the triumph of good or evil through martyrdom, rather than to take an "objective" view of their losses. []

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Impact on the Hostages and Internal Politics

[] commented that there is very little chance the Iranians will "eat crow" on the hostage issue in order to gain spare parts and other supplies. There is little the US can do to speed the process of releasing the hostages. The Iranians will perceive US proposals as deceit and lies and US concessions as weaknesses to be exploited. Internal Iranian political dynamics will determine when the hostages are released. []

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[] emphasized that it is too early to make confident predictions about the outcome of the Iraqi conflict on Iranian politics. The clerics' position may not necessarily be weakened and Bani-Sadr may be vulnerable because he has taken public responsibility for defense. On the other hand the increasing importance of the military may strengthen Bani-Sadr's hand. []

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[] was impressed by Bani-Sadr's ability to call out a massive crowd in early September. He noted that Bani-Sadr may be able to establish his claim to embody the principles of the revolution as opposed to a clerical leader like Beheshti who is not widely trusted. []

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Food and fuel shortages this winter and Iran's great need for money to rebuild the oil industry may contribute to greater moderation. Khomeini's consciousness of his own mortality may also add to moderation of factional squabbling as he intervenes to press for securing the progress of the revolution. On the other hand, Khomeini's constituency is capable of existing on a low economic level--denuding the forests for fuel rather than relying on oil, for example--and Iranians are just as likely to "hunker down" as to turn against the clerical extremists. Iran has no tradition of civil unrest because of economic deprivation. []

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[] believes that factional infighting will continue. The cleric's concern to weaken their rivals increases as the issue of succession to Khomeini comes closer. The struggle against the reformist moderates may now take the form of looking for who is to blame for the losses of territory. []

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If Iranian losses mount, the present regime could collapse. There is some possibility that the military might move to blame the defeats on the clergy's policies and take power in Khomeini's name. The regime might be further weakened if the fighting leads to greater unrest among the minority groups. [] does not see any major gains for the left in this situation. As the left moves closer to power the differences that divide the leftist groups becomes greater. []

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